

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson*****Interoperable Emergency Communications:
Does the National Broad Band Plan Meet the Needs of First
Responders***

July 27, 2010 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Emergency Communication, Preparedness, and Response Subcommittee hearing entitled “Interoperable Emergency Communications: Does the National Broad Band Plan Meet the Needs of First Responders”:

“The issue of interoperable communications is a simple concept, in theory. Police, Fire, EMTs, all working together at the scene of a disaster, talking to each other with a push of a button.

Unfortunately, this reality still remains elusive. Interoperable communications at catastrophes are often a matter of life and death. We learned that lesson after the Oklahoma City bombing, the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina.

We cannot afford to wait for another major disaster to get this right.

As a former volunteer firefighter, I know first-hand the importance of having a network that you can rely on to transmit vital information in real time.

I also saw the need for a strong nationwide broadband network in my recent trip to the Arizona border, where first responders could not easily communicate with ranchers or each other near the border.

I understand that the FCC’s National Broadband Plan is the Administration’s blueprint to get us there, but, as the Chairwoman noted, there are still many questions about the proposal to auction the 10 megahertz (MHz) of spectrum called the “D-Block.”

While the FCC’s role, as the primary architect of the Plan is well understood, we are less clear on what role DHS had in the development of the plan.

After all, under the law, DHS is charged with “fostering the development of interoperable emergency communications.”

This Committee needs to hear the extent to which DHS, during the developmental stages, conducted outreach to the public safety community and, in turn, represented the community’s interests in the process.

The fact that some in the public safety community are advocating for reallocation of the D Block gives the impression that their interests were not adequately represented in the process.

While I fully appreciate public safety’s desire to obtain and control more spectrum, we need to make sure that there is funding to buy, install, operate, and maintain all the necessary the equipment.

The National Broadband Plan estimates these costs to be between \$12 billion and \$16 billion over 10 years.

Given our current fiscal environment and the tight budgetary conditions that many State and local jurisdictions are experiencing, it may be very difficult to find the funding.

I look forward to hearing from our friends in public safety how they intend to fund the build-out of the system, particularly in rural communities.

I expect that first responders in rural communities do not have the resources for a costly build-out or to buy new equipment year after year.

Resources should not be a barrier to participation in a nationwide system.

Any interoperable wireless network that we call "nationwide" needs to touch every corner of this nation.

I am particularly pleased that Mr. Graham from Cellular South in Mississippi is with us today to discuss the communication challenges in rural communities.

At the end of the day, we are talking about saving lives, so it is critical that we finally move forward with a workable solution."

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